

PROFILE

Best of both worlds

Only one person in the entire world has walked in space *and* travelled to the deepest part of the ocean – and that person is Kathy Sullivan. As we recently discovered, the American icon and Omega ambassador has plenty of wisdom and perspective to show for it.

KATHY SULLIVAN NEVER really knew what she wanted to ‘be’ when she was growing up. Which is extraordinary (and frankly a little enviable) when you consider her long list of accomplishments. Part of NASA’s first intake of female astronauts in 1978, Sullivan became the first American woman to complete a space walk six years later. She was a crew member on three Space Shuttle missions (including the deployment of the first space telescope, Hubble) and held scientific advisory roles during both the George H.W. Bush and Obama administrations. To top that off, last year became the first woman to travel 11 kilometres down to Challenger Deep, the deepest known point in the Earth’s seabed, which sits in the western Pacific Ocean at the southern tip of the Mariana Trench. And that’s barely scratching the surface.

Rather than setting out with a calculated career plan, Sullivan has always let her deep-seated sense of curiosity guide her. “*I wonder ...* has always been the question that comes to my mind,” she explains.

While her CV reads like the ultimate bucket list, some things still take Sullivan by surprise. Being invited to become an ambassador for luxury watchmaker Omega is one recent example. A trusted timekeeper of both space and dive missions – the Omega Speedmaster X-33 Skywalker is certified by The European Space Agency for use on the International Space Station – the Swiss luxury watch brand couldn’t have found a more qualified spokesperson. Another surprise came by way of this interview. “Never in 100 years did I think I’d be in *Vogue*,” says Sullivan with a laugh. “It’s quite fun.”

VOGUE AUSTRALIA: The word ‘curiosity’ comes up quite frequently in conversations and interviews about your career. Where does your sense of curiosity come from?

KATHY SULLIVAN: “Well, my curiosity hasn’t just been about work. It’s been about the world around me – how things work, what other people are like, why the world is a certain way, what different cultures are like ... it’s bizarrely broad and unfettered. Some of the earliest things I remember being curious about were the adventures I saw in the pages of *National Geographic*. I don’t suspect I read every word of every article in *National Geographic*, I was mostly absorbed in the photographs and the maps. I read all of the captions.”

VA: Is that where you discovered oceanography?

KS: “I’d probably read about it in *Nat Geo*, but it hadn’t really clicked that if you liked what Jacques Cousteau did, you ought to be an oceanographer. It wasn’t until I went to college that I saw what marine biology was all about, and what it was like to be a scientist pursuing those fields. The lifestyles of my professors seemed to match the kind of lifestyle I’d been hoping for.”

VA: You were one of six women to join NASA in 1978 as part of its first intake of female astronauts. Do you have any theories as to why you were selected?

KS: “I do, but it’s just speculation. I had years of experience planning and organising oceanography expeditions, which ticked the high-stakes, no-kidding, real-world →

Kathy Sullivan emerging from the ‘Limiting Factor’ submersible, wearing the Omega Seamaster on her left hand and the X-33 on her right, after travelling to Challenger Deep in 2020.



practical experience box. I think NASA was also looking for substantially younger people who could have a long career with the agency. When I joined, the youngest astronaut in the core group was 39 – I was 26.”

VA: The 1980s were a decade of breakthroughs for space travel. What was it like to be on the inside during that time?

KS: “The Space Shuttle was just off the drawing board and in the process of being launched, and various junior astronaut support roles helped to make [Space Shuttle *Columbia*] happen. It really did feel like coming in on the ground floor – or the corporate metaphor of starting in the mailroom and working your way up. Coupled with doing the first-ever satellite repair in space – all of that stuff was on the docket. To look at that and think: ‘Once we finally get this aeroplane going, we’ll end up on one of those.’ It was cool.”

VA: You’ve been part of the scientific community for approximately five decades. How have you witnessed the approach to climate change shift during that time?

KS: “It’s been fascinating to watch the evolution of this issue, and the back and forth of it. I first encountered global warming just after I left NASA in 1992, when I became the chief scientist of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration under the first President Bush. There were a number of white papers that had been written by that administration, and they stated very clearly that these trends were going to cause a problem, and that we needed to get out in front of this problem.”

VA: Do you have any thoughts on why we didn’t get out in front of it sooner?

KS: “It isn’t until the biggest levers on national governments – like homeland security and the insurance market – begin noticing shifts to the [environmental] risks we’re familiar with, as well as the introduction of new risks, that governments begin acting swiftly. Unfortunately, it’s a bit like thinking about fire safety in your home as it’s burning to the ground.”

VA: On a citizen level, what can we be doing to help preserve our oceans?

KS: “I think the biggest thing is that we need to keep it on the radar of people who are making the decisions that affect policy around fisheries, marine protection and conservation. Because unless your elected officials know that this is something people are concerned about, they’ll just go with the opinion polls.”

VA: You wore two Omega watches during your expedition to the bottom of the world’s deepest oceanic trench last year.



Sullivan, at centre, onboard the Space Shuttle *Discovery* in April 1990.

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Why were those watches suitable companions for the journey?

KS: “The Omega folks and I thought it would be fun to wear the Speedmaster X-33 Skywalker, which is a watch that’s certified for use on the International Space Station. We were like, ‘let’s do a sea and space thing’, since my career has been in sea and space. I also wanted to take the white Seamaster I wear for my daily watch, so that now, every time I look at the time I can chuckle and think: ‘That one came with me to Challenger Deep, too.’”

VA: Fear doesn’t seem to be an issue for you in your approach to life. Has it ever been?

KS: “Risk and fear have certainly kept me from some things in the past, but I’m more of a: ‘Well, that’s interesting, let’s think about that. Should we try that?’ kind of person, as opposed to: ‘Ugh! Back away.’”

VA: Is there something you’ve learned in life, that you would share with someone interested in pursuing a career in space, oceanography, or both?

KS: “It seems like there’s so much pressure on young people to have a target and make a plan these days. But I’m at least one living example of someone who’s navigated life with a deeper, more organic compass needle. I’ve never been able to put a label on it, or give any grown-up an intelligent-sounding explanation of it, mind you, but that compass needle has always been there.”